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The ratings fantasy

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The ratings fantasy

In a speech at the University of Buffalo last month President Obama described a [plan](#) in which the federal government would rank colleges and universities on some yet undetermined metrics with the goal of providing education consumers with more information and possibly linking tax-payer money to school performance. The broader objectives are to keep costs down and increase access to education.

This plan has generated a tremendous amount of [commentary](#) in the education world and beyond, not much of it positive.

Among the concerns is the prospect of increasing the federal role in education, especially for private schools like CSB and SJU. There is also the question of what problem is trying to be solved here. Is there truly a market failure in that consumers cannot get good information about what schools provide—at least schools who have been in business for a long time? Furthermore, what does one use to rank schools: costs, graduation rates, earnings of graduates, retention rates? “It’s a very hard job to decide on how to rate colleges,” Derek Bok, former president of Harvard University, [said](#). “I have to be somewhat apprehensive when any force as powerful as the federal government undertakes the task.”

Finally, how will a rankings system affect incentives for colleges and universities? If retention becomes key, for example, there will be an obvious incentive for schools to avoid admitting students who might be a retention risk, creating an outcome that would harm exactly those students we might be most interested in providing access.

These policies are not likely to have a significant impact on CSB and SJU, as we would look good by almost any measure policymakers might come up with. We, in fact, have been a leader in sharing outcomes data for our students. We have a [webpage](#) that lists outcomes for the vast majority of our students for the past several years. Take a look. The data reveal a very positive picture of the education we are providing at the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John’s University.

The national concerns about higher education are real, and we certainly must be attentive to the concerns of students and their families, but when politicians attempt to wish away complex problems with simplistic solutions whose consequences are not well-considered, students and ultimately the country are likely to be hurt.

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Michael Hemesath is the 13th president of Saint John's University. A 1981 SJU graduate, Hemesath is the first layperson appointed to a full presidential term at SJU. You can find him on Twitter [at] [PrezHemesath](#).